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The End of the World and Other Times in *The Future*

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4
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In an interview with his biographer Sylvie Simmons, Leonard Cohen identifies the main interests in his work as "women, song, religion" (p. 280). These are not merely personal concerns for Cohen, they are dimensions of the world that he tries to understand as a poet, singer, and thinker.

Now it's something of a cliché to see the modern romantic or post-romantic singer or poet in terms of personal struggles, failures, triumphs, and reversals. Poets sometimes respond by adopting elusive, ironic, enigmatic, or parodic voices: think, in their different ways, of Bob Dylan and Anne Carson. Yet Cohen has always worn his heart on his sleeve or some less clothed part of his body: he let us know, for example, that Janis Joplin gave him head in the Chelsea hotel while their celebrity limos were waiting outside. We want to know all about Suzanne, Marianne, and the sisters of mercy (two traveling young women whom he gave chaste shelter one night). Cohen's many biographers are obsessed with his loves, depression, career ups and downs, Montreal Jewish origins, Buddhist practice and monastic retreats.

Recently, provoked in part by the album *Old Ideas*, and an ambitious, successful world tour, Cohen's public has shown interest in how he is dealing with aging, or more subtly, with the artist's meeting the challenge of the late career. Rather than focusing on Cohen's life (multiple biographies already

exist) I want to think with him about the meaning—or more specifically meanings—of time, a theme he clearly addresses in the album *The Future* (1992). As the Christian philosopher Augustine said about time, we all think that we know what it is until we ask ourselves to define it.

Meanings of Time

In *The Future* Cohen asks and finds some answers. Let's begin by looking at the first two songs, one about the end of time, the other about endless waiting, and then ask if these are the only ways of experiencing time in Cohen's universe. The title song evokes a vision of an apocalypse at the end of time. "Waiting for the Miracle" is a dark anatomy of a life based on deferral, on putting things off. We all want "Democracy" but when and how will it come? "Closing Time" is the hour when the bar closes, yet possibly time itself is closing. All lovers, Cohen says (covering a classic Irving Berlin song), should vow eternal love, love "always." These songs concern the experience—more precisely a range of various actual and possible experiences—of time. They deal with what philosophers call the phenomenology of time: sudden and startling change, interruption, boredom, anticipation of major events, and vows of eternal fidelity. Cohen invites us to think our way through a spectrum of ways of experiencing time ("temporalities," some would say). *The Future* consistently interrogates time. It explores and articulates different forms of temporality from religious, romantic, political, and artistic perspectives. It invites us to think about whether and how we can live these different times and how they are related.

The Future as Apocalypse

In the lead song Cohen—or his prophetic persona—identifies himself as a servant of an unnamed higher power. His mission is to tell us of the vision of the future he's been granted. That future is murder. It teems with grotesque scenes of tor-

ture, fire, and phantoms. In this future we might as well abort fetuses and destroy the last trees. Readers of the Biblical Apocalypse will recognize imagery drawn from that story about the end of the world, yet it is updated and filled with our time's obsessive fears. Dehumanization, environmental disaster, loss of individuality and privacy, terror and humiliation are what the future has in store. Cohen's future gives a voice to our fears.

"The Future," speaks prophetically from the standpoint of a world lost or transformed—post-catastrophe, post-disaster (after the final turn, after the terrible misalignment of the stars). Whether through the emergence of the beast from the abyss and Antichrist (as in Christian tradition), or in more contemporary terms through war, environmental collapse, pandemic, domination by a society of total surveillance, or global capitalism, from this visionary site the dreadful has already happened. Everything is over. This is why Cohen calls for the restoration of the Berlin Wall, of Stalin and Saint Paul.

Yet why does the singer cry for the return of barriers and order, even those of tyranny, religious orthodoxy, and the Cold War? Christian theology offers a clue when it teaches that there is a "restraining force," in Greek a *katechon*, that holds back the coming of the Antichrist and the world's end. The Biblical source is the Second Letter to the Thessalonians attributed (doubtfully) to Paul; it speaks obscurely of a *katechon* in order to discourage premature expectations of the final tribulations and Christ's return. From the song's perspective, the *katechon* no longer works, the future we had hoped to delay is here: it is murder. Here is one perspective on time on the largest scale. Time as we know it can come to an end. In "The Future" there no longer is a future. It is a future robbed of futurity, of any sense of open possibility.

The song begins with regret for a time that has been lost, a world that no longer exists. The singer (or chanter) wants back what has been taken. But this is not the deep unease with "time and its 'it was'" that Friedrich Nietzsche analyzed as the deepest core of human resentment. It is a cry of dis-

tress at the loss of a specific kind of life that's no longer possible in the future. What disappeared was a private, secret life reflected infinitely in a mirrored room. The catastrophe involves the disappearance of walls and borders within which the singer could enjoy his former broken nights, including delights like anal sex.

Assuming a prophetic persona that owes much to both Jewish and Christian Biblical traditions (Simmons calls it "Jeremiah in Tin-Pan Alley") Cohen speaks (like Isaiah or Ezekiel) as a servant told to say with absolute chilling clarity that "it's over." Like Isaiah and Ezekiel he's seen nations triumph and decline. The "nations" are those peoples whose successions and relations constitute world history, the time of the world. That history comes to an end in "The Future." Whether we think of the tribulations of the last days foretold by Hebrew prophets or John's Apocalypse (which owes much to contemporary Jewish texts), or more recent fears of total disaster, it means that we are beyond measure, over the threshold, in a world of phantoms, road fires, your inverted and suspended woman, lousy Charles Manson–like poets, and the dancing white man. These can all be heard as rewritings of passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel (for example, see Isaiah 3:17–23 on the upside-down woman). The dancing white man surrenders his traditional position as privileged spectator and now becomes the spectacle. All that's left to do, the voice bitterly declares, is to join in the general murder and destruction, including abortion and ecocide.

The refrain exhibits Cohen's mastery of ironic ambiguity, not knowing what "they" meant by "repent." Does the prophet fail to understand his own instruction? Or is he channeling Spinoza, who said that "one who repents is doubly unhappy and weak"? And who's claiming credit as the Bible's Jewish author? Is it God, traditional author of the Pentateuch through Moses, the actual writers who severely edited and added to older texts, or Cohen himself, who here and elsewhere rewrites the Bible? Questions about time have yet to be answered.

Waiting for the Miracle

The end-of-the-world scenario is only one form of time that Cohen sings of on this album. If the main point of view in the first song is theological and cosmic, the second, "Waiting for the Miracle," mercilessly reveals the very private life of lovers who've repeatedly postponed their union, perhaps until it's too late. No doubt we all dwell on those moments when "if only" we had responded to that invitation, taken that chance, or chosen a different path everything would have been better and different. It's all about missing the right time, failing to seize the opportunity, because we vaguely imagined that a miracle—something totally outside our power—would come along, resolving our life's uncertainties and indecisions. There may also be the suggestion that the poet too waits passively and too long for his inspiration. While Cohen speaks to a single person, the "I" and the "you" here could be anybody, could be you.

Stoic philosophers, like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, harshly criticize the conventional time experience of waiting and deferral. Instead we should be alert for the opportune time, the temporary imbalance that provides an opening that could be seized to effect a major transformation of individual or collective life. In "Waiting for the Miracle" Cohen gives a stronger and more moving critique of waiting than do the Stoics. The song explores the dark side of delay and deferral, the time of the *katechon* in which we stretch out time to the maximum, fearing to take a chance or make a decision. The singer confesses to wasting his time, waiting for the miracle. Waiting here is the dark side of mere succession, of time as one damn thing after another, the devouring time that the Greeks call *chronos* and which the philosopher John Locke termed "perpetual perishing." The miracle would be (in Greek thought) the *kairos*, the transformative, decisive event or opportunity, the opposite of *chronos*. Cohen sometimes calls it a "transcendental moment," showing that he too can use a philosophical vocabulary. In this song the miraculous *kairos* is a wan hope, the

dream of someone who's collapsed on the road of life, lying in the rain, drenched in regret.

Sylvie Simmons interprets this song and the album as Cohen's proposal of marriage to Rebecca de Mornay. This would surely be one of the most melancholy proposals imaginable, since he'd be asking the lover to adopt a life of parallel solitude with him while they continue to wait for the miraculous event. But if we understood the collection of songs from this point of view, we might be haunted by the suspicion that it is composed in a somewhat private lovers' language. In this light the album cover illustration—a bird, a heart, an open pair of handcuffs—invites speculation about binding and unbinding in several registers, and presents a number of interpretive options. Perhaps more specifically it's the emblem of ambivalence. Love (the heart) serves as a perch for either being proverbially "free as a bird" or the "bird on the wire," who, like Cohen, has no choice but to sing. Open handcuffs suggest the play of restraint and captivity, maybe an S-M bondage game, one that both highlights the theme and questions any simple opposition of freedom and bondage.

Whether or not the entire album should be construed as a marriage proposal, the one extended by the singer of "Waiting for the Miracle" invites much thought about love, time, and song. In this song it is always already too late. Life has been wasted and youth spent in the waiting process. The miracle is not the object of faith, which holds with passion to the coming event, or of hope, which still believes in possibility. But mere waiting for what may or may not come lacks both passion and a living sense of possibility. In the passive mode, giving oneself over to undifferentiated *chronos*, there's "nothing left to do." Pointless waiting and disappointed expectations are of course a major theme of the blues, which typically give voice to the downside of *chronos*, the feeling of futility, often announced by phrases like "Woke up this morning. . . ." In "Be for Real," one of two covers in this album, the singer who has a history of being hurt by his lover, fears being hurt again (and again) if she returns. "Waiting for the Miracle" differs from blues songs that lament a more or less

datable loss (like your lover dumping you) because it records and regrets a failure to act, to seize the moment. Heard this way it reflects on the loss of time itself; it leads to thinking of an experience of time as loss.

We could read Cohen's song alongside Nietzsche's aphorism on "*The problem of those who wait*" in *Beyond Good and Evil* (section 274). Here Nietzsche writes like a Stoic, seeing most human beings as aimlessly waiting: "in every corner of the earth people sit waiting, hardly knowing how much they are waiting, much less that they are waiting in vain. And every once in a while, the alarm call will come too late. . . ." The genius of Cohen's song is its foregrounding the consciousness of waiting and realizing only too late that it is too late and time has gotten away from you irretrievably. "I didn't see the time / I waited half my life away." Waiting means that invitations or opportunities were declined. There was the passive expectation that "the great event" would simply manifest itself. The alternative, Nietzsche implies, is vigilance, readiness to seize *kairos* by the forelock. One of Cohen's most unusual pieces (on the collection *More Best of Leonard Cohen*) is a short statement, read by a robotic female voice, called "The Great Event," which says that time will be renewed "next Tuesday" when he/she plays the "Midnight Sonata" backwards.

Recall here the ancient figure of *kairos*. This personified image of opportunity has two pairs of wings, one growing from his back, one sprouting from his ankles. He is typically represented as holding a scale which is out of balance. That is, the time he announces is one in which things are shifting and rearranging themselves. Circumstances are open briefly to being mastered if we can read the signs of the times. We must literally seize the time, adroitly grasping the shock of hair at the front of his head. Otherwise, we'll be left in the lurch as we see the bald back of his head quickly speeding by. In contrast, a Cohen song about seizing *kairos* by the forelock is "First We Take Manhattan." There the singer declares that he was sentenced to "twenty years of boredom for trying to change the system from within." Rather than grasping the

opportune moment when things are imbalanced, he submitted himself to the routines of the system, to the bureaucratic measured time that eats away at spontaneous life and keeps us going with promises of gradual change or the expectation of secure retirement.

Happy Times: Let's All Get Naked

So is time coming to a terrible, final end or are we condemned (possibly self-condemned) to lead a life of eternal waiting in some limbo condition? This is the question posed by the two opening songs of *The Future*. With this question in mind, let's return to Cohen's three great interests—women, song, religion—seeing them from the perspective of prophecy and salvation (if we were to explore this from a biographical perspective, we could dwell on Cohen's close study of the prophet Isaiah with his rabbinical grandfather). These seem to coincide in an apocalyptic thematic of the glorified body and songs of divine praise and celebration.

Apocalypse is not only a final end it is also nakedness, a favorite Cohen theme. So, a brief note on language: in the Greco-Jewish translation of the Hebrew scriptures (known as the Septuagint) the Greek word *apokalypsis* was used as the equivalent of the Hebrew *gala*, which means uncovering or denuding. Biblical apocalypse and Cohen's frequent image of happiness, then, are both simultaneously revelation and denuding. I am less interested in uncovering the naked Leonard than in understanding Cohen's theme of nakedness (starker than mere nudity) in its full apocalyptic sense. When we are naked everything's been revealed and the final truth is unavoidable. Characteristically, Cohen says (adding his own words to his cover of a song by Frederick Knight) he is interested only in naked truth ("Be for Real"). The woman's naked body is a signature Cohen image, often expressed in religious language, as in "Light as the Breeze," where the lover's adoration is presented as a celebration of the glorious body. There he preaches adoration of the woman's body, prescribes a kneeling posture for devotion,

and compares the sexual delta to the confluence of the river and the sea. The last image suggests a way of making contact with the oceanic or cosmic. This is the worship of the absolute, the alpha and omega (a phrase out of Apocalypse) or beginning and end of all things. Recording his own devotions, Cohen says he knelt like a believer, received something like a heavenly benediction, and achieved a glorious moment of peace. Theologically speaking, we might say he was participating in that life of salvation where all work is completed and there is nothing left to do but to give praise. If the choir of the saved and the angels sing hymns to God then, Cohen's "spiritual" addresses the naked body of the beloved.

This concatenation of questions around the theme of nakedness is especially strong in the verse of "Waiting for the Miracle" where Cohen says that he dreamed of his mostly naked lover, also waiting, as the sands of time ran through her hands. Yet some of her was light, perhaps the light, as he says in "Anthem," that comes through the cracks in everything and opens up another spiritual dimension.

Beginning Again, Ending Again, Escaping Time

Let's consider the remaining songs on *The Future* which broaden the spectrum of temporal experience and provide alternatives to the dichotomy of terrible end or endless waiting posed by the first two pieces. "Anthem" is all about beginnings and persistence in a world where wars continue, the "holy dove" is caught and commodified, and there's no point in trying to make a "perfect offering" (this may allude to ritual sacrifices precisely specified in Leviticus and Deuteronomy). Every day at dawn the birds sing and begin anew. The singer not only heard them doing this, he heard them *saying* it. Song is a repeated litany of new beginnings, not just pointless waiting or a repeated round of suffering. Cohen provides his own version of those New World thinkers Emerson and Thoreau, who celebrate the promise of life in each fresh morning. Authentic beginning requires freedom from unnec-

essary, excessive concern with the past and future. In contrast to this mode of renewal through song, there are "signs" of the failure of governments and the continuing rule of hypocritical killers who disguise themselves through public piety. World history is a succession of ruins. And despite this, the world, as evidenced by the birds of dawn, is not a closed totality. The future is still open, but how? Somewhat enigmatically Cohen discloses that despite everything "There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

Here Cohen may be channeling a Gnostic thought: in this flawed world, created perhaps by a malevolent god (not God), some inkling of salvation or light nevertheless becomes evident through its very flaws and cracks. Contrast this with the framework of Jewish and Christian monotheism that give a sense to apocalyptic times in the lead song. These traditional religions see creation and salvation as involving the acts of a single deity. The world and its history are redeemed by the same God who created them. In Gnosticism—a philosophical and religious view that competed vigorously with early Christianity—the world is hopelessly irredeemable, the product of an evil or minor god (sometimes called a demiurge, following Plato). Yet there are uncanny cracks in the oppressive order of the created world, cracks allowing a metaphysical or spiritual light to appear. Escape from the miserable world is not through a sacred history developing within it (for example, from Adam through Abraham and Jesus and finally the end of days). Liberation depends on seizing the opportunity offered by the bits of light that get through the cracks. Deep down we are all sparks of pure light that can be awakened in the right circumstances.

So is Cohen a Gnostic? I prefer to think that he borrows a Gnostic metaphor to articulate the struggle to free oneself from the fallen world; perhaps Gnostic ideas filtered down to him from the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. In "Anthem" he adapts the Gnostic motif of the cracks that let dazzling bits of light shine through the world's darkness. It is the anthem of a campaign or conflict, but of what kind? A struggle carried on without regard to time and future by those who

sing, whether dawn's birds or midnight's poets? Or does the poet promise to engage with the world when he vows that the unnamed malevolent powers will hear from him? Yet he says this without much force and the march has no drum.

I have been suggesting that while the album *The Future* is about time, no single theory, view, perspective, or attitude with regard to time takes precedence over the others. Rather than taking this as a sign of incoherence, we might see it as a kind of *lyrical phenomenology* of time, in which an array of experiences and understandings of time is given voice. At some points shifts in tone invite us to think about shifts in temporal focus. "Anthem" ends by calling for a march, but notes that there are no drums; as if in response, the next song "Democracy" begins with a lively upbeat drumming march. If "Anthem" is ambivalent about activist engagement, the words and tone of "Democracy" are full of militant hope and enthusiasm. "Democracy" is coming, we're repeatedly told, although it's uncertain what its mode of being is: "it's real" but not "exactly there."

I would be surprised if Cohen were familiar with Jacques Derrida's idea of "the democracy to come" (p. 104), but I think we can use it to make sense of this militant, hopeful song. Derrida talks about the "e-vent," the unexpected, unpredictable, incalculable, surprising future which arrives, not in the form of a specific state of things (like a new constitution, governmental reforms, and so on) but that which is *always* to come.

Our vision of a full democracy should always be expanding as we respond to more calls for inclusion. Its shimmering spectral reality is the shadow that the future in process, always still to be determined, casts on the present and the past. It's not impotent waiting but enthusiastic expectation. Each verse of the song begins by declaring "It's coming. . . " and names fermenting, chaotic sites and provocations that elicit democracy from "a crack in the wall." The crack of course recalls the crack that lets the light in ("Anthem"). But now the crack is *in the wall*. Walls mark borders defining the power of states whose sovereignty restricts the spontaneous and autonomous activity of the people. Walls suggest social

and political divisions that constrict democracy. Cohen deploys an extensive, varied set of metaphors summoning up visions of those cracks—homeless camps, the AIDS crisis, broken families—from which the democracy's light breaks in. If the future of the album's opening song is irredeemable disaster, the coming democracy is a paradigm of *futurity*, the openness to the radically new that cannot be predicted on the basis of the past. It is always arriving. Its reality is never complete, never fully determinate, always to come. We could describe this as the difference between apocalyptic and messianic—as in "messiah"—time. Apocalyptic time is that of the end, the final event. It announces the last judgment from which there is no appeal. Messianic time is a time of liberation and openness, as in "Democracy" where the heart opens, barriers are demolished, and a fresh future emerges, as in the Sermon on the Mount. It's a time freed from past restraints rather than a closing of time itself.

"Closing Time," by contrast, is honky-tonk eschatology, the end of the world in the alcoholic and erotic haze of a roadhouse Cohen might have frequented during his time in Nashville. We wonder whether it's just closing time in the tavern as dancers choose final partners for the night, or the closing time of a love affair, or could it also be a closing *of* time, an end of all things? In other words, is "closing" an adjective marking a specific time or a verb denoting the act or process of closing, completing, or finishing time? The second is suggested by the two times the dancers go successively crazy for both the devil and Christ. That sounds like the two moments of John's Apocalypse: first the catastrophe (devil), then Christ's kingdom on earth. Yet the site of "Closing Time" is also a bell tower that chimes "the blessed hours." Are these the bells that "Anthem" commands us to ring? As in other songs on *The Future*, uncanny cracks and thresholds appear. The scene at closing time may look like freedom, but feels like death. There is both a scene of revelry, a choosing of final partners, and the foreboding that the revels are now at an end. It must be something in between life and death, as democracy is real but not exactly there.

Love Always

The original version of "Always" was written by Irving Berlin in 1925 and has been a standard tune ever since. Most versions take about three minutes. Cohen extends the song to eight minutes by means of a slow steady beat, choral backing, and playful interchange with the chorus, singing in one of his deepest tones, with repetition, framing, and his own additions. There's a heavy emphasis on the word "always." He adds a verse which could hardly have worked in the 1925 version comparing this true vow to lesser couplings, from flings in the shower to summer romances. The song expresses simply the lover's impossible yet necessary pledge of eternal love and fidelity. Can we seize the opportunity of love? Can love conquer time? Can a joyous eternity displace the stifling one damn thing after another of *chronos*? The final number on the album, "Tacoma Trailer," is a haunting, purely instrumental piece. As musical time flows calmly we are given an opportunity to think about questions like these that are raised in *The Future* and to meditate on the album's different takes on time.[1]

[1] Many thanks to Louis Schwartz who helped me to clarify many aspects of this essay and to Babette Babich whose work on music and contribution to our symposium on "Leonard Cohen and Philosophy" at the 2013 World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, Greece were invaluable stimuli.